



Alabama Making Strides Against Autism

Lieutenant Governor Jim Folsom, Jr.

July 14, 2008

Recent reports published by the Autism Society of America, suggest that more children will be diagnosed with autism this year than cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined. Autism is a complex disorder, with no known cause or cure, which severely debilitates an individual's ability to communicate effectively and to develop socially. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has recently declared autism a national public health crisis.

In fact, the needs of those affected by autism have grown exponentially in recent history. Currently, one in every 150 children in the United States is diagnosed with autism each year. These statistics are quite unsettling and suggest that further progress must be made to effectively assess and promptly address this epidemic.

Alabama is no stranger in dealing with the particulars of autism. This issue has plagued our state for decades and has been further exaggerated by a shortage of both services offered and a general access to healthcare. There was a time when Alabama

lacked even the most basic autism services which are widely available in other states. Statistics show that autistic children in Alabama went undiagnosed until they were nearly 4½ years of age, which is well behind the national average. In some cases, health-care providers report that families of autistic children are forced to wait as long as 8 months before having access to autism specialists. This situation was unacceptable and impeded any opportunity for early prevention.

In 1990, there were a total of 68 children in public schools diagnosed with autism in Alabama. By December of 2000, that number had risen significantly to 849 cases of autism in Alabama public schools. And as recently as 2006, the state of Alabama has seen an overall increase of diagnosed autism in our public school system by nearly 3000% since 1990. This dramatic increase of autism diagnoses amongst autistic children between 1990 and 2006 raises serious questions about the leadership and resources allocated to correctly address this issue. The lack of priority attributed to this matter is not only alarming, but also despairingly negligent and utterly irreprehensible.

Recently, my office has made important strides in effectively addressing the diverse issues faced by families who are impacted by Autism throughout the state. In March, State Representative Cam Ward (R-Alabaster) and I were delighted to announce a bi-partisan task force for Autism in Alabama. Joining this coordinated effort were members of the Autism Society of Alabama, the Department of Mental Health and Retardation, along with a diverse coalition of families and service providers from around the state.

The task force is responsible for exploring the challenges faced by a growing number of parents in Alabama who are raising a child with an autism disorder and for critically assessing the considerable limitations in services available to these families. This group has the unprecedented opportunity to develop a state-wide plan, improve the quality of life, and promote a greater sense of awareness for those affected by this debilitating disorder.

I am proud to be involved in this bipartisan effort to deal with an issue that affects so many Alabama families. By working together, this autism task force will be able to marshal resources, ideas, and energy to make a measurable difference and bring about real change. I possess a strong desire to focus the entirety of concentrated efforts on resolving Alabama's shortcomings pertaining to this issue.

Recently, the task force traveled across the state to listen to the sordid experiences of those afflicted with autism. Preliminary findings by the Alabama Autism Task Force revealed frustration and disparity amidst widespread service gaps beginning as early as infancy and continuing throughout adulthood. Alabama is falling desperately behind in comparison to other states. The recommendations set forth by the Task Force culminated in our first ever Autism Awareness Day at the capitol in April and the formation of an Alabama Autism Support Council. This interagency council, which was passed by House Joint Resolution 3 during the recent special session, created a permanent state agency to provide assistance to families dealing with autism. The council is composed of a diverse array of stakeholders, both public and private, who will work to coordinate state services and acquire federal funding. This is a critical step in ensuring

that Alabama families have the necessary resources to properly address the immediate and physical demands of those with Autism.

State Representative Cam Ward, who has a child with autism, has shown unsurpassed compassion, conviction, and resolve in bringing Alabama to the forefront of this issue.

I would like to personally commend the dedication shown by Representative Ward and I sincerely appreciate the coordinated bipartisan efforts, vision, and spirited commitment from volunteers, legislators, and the vast array of public and private agencies that assisted in leading the charge for this cause.

Make no mistake, this movement could not have occurred by simply magnifying the issue of autism. The formation and implementation of this collaborative effort required great vision, leadership, and a great amount of skill to become a reality.

Though the challenges to manage autism in this state are immense, the clear, steady, and unwavering leadership and commitment to progressive change is apparent in the efforts put forth by all those involved in this crucial endeavor. With a renewed sense of awareness and the hope for a better future, families and individuals afflicted by this disorder can hopefully find comfort and assurance that they are no longer alone in this journey.

For more information on the Alabama Autism Task Force or to learn more about autism in Alabama, you can visit the task force's website at

www.camward.com/AutismTaskForce.htm or the Autism Society of Alabama at

www.autism-alabama.org/. Lt. Governor Folsom can be reached at

info@ltgov.alabama.gov.

